

DC State Board of Education
April 27, 2011
Comments by Paula Y. Koda

Thank you to the Board and Sally for the invitation to provide insight into this most important topic, from the perspective of businesses.

Over my career in sales, high tech and consulting, I've had the good fortune to live, study and work in three foreign countries for nearly 14 years. During those periods, most recently five years in Beijing, China, I am always struck by how much more other countries know about the US than we know about them. Furthermore, there is a willingness to engage and be involved and understand the world around them, which exists only in certain groups here in America. Increasingly, the skill sets that are required to function internationally - cultural awareness, geopolitical and historical understanding, and language competencies - are the currency determining a successful career, a winning market strategy or a profitable company. Yet these competencies are not usually required for high school graduation, much less university graduation and only recently becoming vogue in Business schools!

Without these skills or the access to learn these skills American workers, corporations and ultimately our citizens risk being left behind our major global competitors in the ability to compete. There is also a risk of creating a gap within our society; between those who do have the exposure and competencies and those who don't, between individuals who are comfortable and capable of working with people in other nations and can easily navigate in and out of other cultures and those who are not. Often, something as simple as exposure can illuminate this gap.

It is partly an awareness of this gap that drives the activities of Americans Promoting Study Abroad (APSA). APSA is a non-profit organization established in 2008 providing full scholarships to deserving youth from US public high schools across the country to study Chinese language and culture in China for six weeks during the summer. In addition to community service activities, sightseeing and exploration, our program introduces the students to various career paths by visiting campuses of US companies and organizations in Beijing, like Coca-Cola, MTV, The IMF and The NBA. We also sponsor "Young Professionals" panels where Americans and others in their early and mid- 20s (and some in the ripe old age of their 30's) come to speak to the students about their work and life in Beijing, what brought them there, what keeps them there and what they would suggest to high school students of today to prepare. APSA's unique program reflects the founders' and major donors' backgrounds as business people in China.

DC was one of the initial cities where APSA recruit students, and it is a testimony to our partnership with Sally and CGEL that this year's applicant base was the largest and most impressive it has ever been. Our selection committee had a difficult time narrowing down the candidates to just seven students, two each from School Without Walls and Woodrow Wilson respectively and three from Phelps ACE.

This summer will mark the 100th student who will participate in our China Scholar program. While we are proud of the alumni group and their achievements thus far, we feel it is still not enough. We realize there are more deserving students in DC, and the country, than we have scholarships to offer. We cannot possibly raise all the money needed to meet the demand. The only way to address this challenge is by setting goals focusing on global competencies that can be addressed within the school setting, with the support of educators, parents and the greater community. There must be, along with English, Math and Science, a complimentary emphasis on understanding world events, perhaps in the context of Math, Science and History, and what it means to us and to U.S.

I believe the business community must be a partner, and should be a willing partner, in this effort. After all, American corporations and businesses will be a major beneficiary if provided with a globally knowledgeable, culturally savvy, work force.

There is a lot at stake, but together, I am confident we can meet this challenge.
Thank you.